

Character Education in Portugal



© Boris15

Around the world, children who can exercise their right to attend school spend a significant part of their lives within the education environment. Therefore, schools have a great deal of influence on children's development beyond the academic realm. Given this accessibility to children, schools have opportunities to help children develop positive character traits. Each community must determine what role schools will play in providing character education and what content would be delivered through character education programs. This article explores these issues associated with character education within Portugal, including who should be responsible for providing character education and how it can best be transmitted.

by João Lopes, Célia Oliveira, Lauren Reed, and Robert A. Gable

João Lopes is Associate Professor and Célia Oliveira is Assistant Professor, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal. Lauren Reed is a doctoral student and Robert A. Gable is Constance and Colgate Darden Professor of Special Education, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA.

In countries around the world, public education is undergoing dramatic and fundamental changes. With inclusive education and social justice issues driving education reforms across the world, character education has assumed a crucial role in child development. Educators are now expected to recognize the importance of adjusting their resources and practices to adequately address needs related to character education that may differ with students' age, cultural context, behavior patterns, and other aspects. Additionally, the significance of bringing in systemic changes to understand and define the nature of character education as relevant to a particular context needs to be recognized. This article highlights issues concerning character education in Portugal.

CHARACTER EDUCATION

Character education is a systems-change approach to addressing student affect, cognition, and behavior. However, character education is not easily defined (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2008). As a general term, "character education" is used to describe numerous aspects of the teaching and learning process relating to individual student development (Otten, 2000). Student dispositions usually relate to ethical and moral reasoning, social/emotional learning, conflict resolution/peer mediation, and overall character development. Basic social norms and values are identified, taught, and reinforced throughout the school (Otten, 2000). Davidson et al. (2008) further assert that character education reflects both performance and moral character and that a person of character seeks to achieve their full potential. According to some authorities (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003; Richardson, Tolson, Huang, & Lee, 2009), a positive correlation can be found between character education, discipline-related problems, interpersonal skills, and academic achievement. Also, evidence suggests that schools with character education programs have better school attendance and higher scores on standardized tests (Otten, 2000). Even so, character education is a "universal" intervention; some students will need more targeted, intensive interventions to be successful (Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010).

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF CHARACTER EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL

Some important idiosyncrasies influence character education in Portugal, most of which relate to specific social and political developments. Some authors (e.g., Marques, 2008; Valente & Fonseca, 2007) claim that a "new character education" is

needed in Portugal, one based on the Aristotelian ethic of "becoming just by doing just acts." Others identify with the paradigm of the new character education movements that restore "good character" as the central desirable outcome of schools' moral enterprise (Ryan & Bohlin, 2001). They contend that the prevailing "civic education" perspectives in Portuguese schools are not working. These perspectives are largely based on Kohlberg's socio-cognitive model of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984), which theorizes about behavior motivated by anticipation of pleasure and pain, satisfaction of one's needs and desires, and group or community standards, and on Raths, Harmin, and Simon's (1966) "values clarification," which upholds that children faced with conflicting values can wrest themselves away from value confusion through self-reflection, with proper assistance and guidance from an adult. It is noteworthy that the term "character education" is not used in schools in Portugal. Indeed, the few references to character education in Portuguese literature (e.g., Cunha, 1996; Marques, 2008; Valente & Fonseca, 2007) suggest that the concept is either out of date or out of favor. This may reflect what Hunter (2000) asserts is a retreat from moral theology and the ascendancy of psychology in character education. More than that, it probably reflects the fact that between 1926 and 1974, the governing dictatorship of Portugal strongly emphasized character education as a key element of its ideology.

Between 1926 and 1974, the national curriculum (from 5th to 11th grade) included a compulsory course on "Moral and Catholic Religion." The main goal of the course was to instruct students in "the moral defense of the nation" and for the "moral education" of the individual. The values of respect for authority, conformity, and honor, as well as the virtues of poverty and of rural life, were purposely and systematically taught. In addition, primary grade reading manuals contained a number of religious and moral themes, which were intended to influence children's attitudes and behavior according to the values of the political regime. The core of these values was reflected in the 1936 speech by Oliveira Salazar (Portuguese dictator): "We do not discuss the nation or its history; we do not discuss authority or its prestige; we do not discuss the family or its morals; we do not discuss the glory of the work."

After the fall of the dictatorship in 1974, the Catholic and Moral Religion course was no longer compulsory, and character education became very unpopular. Until the adoption of the new constitution in 1976, interim government officials

refrained from introducing any courses that might resemble the ideology of the previous political regime. The Catholic Moral and Religion course remained a part of the curriculum, but only on a non-compulsory basis.

This situation lasted until 1986, when the Law of the Education System (Law nº 46/86, 1986) was published and a course on “Personal and Social Education” became part of the educational curriculum. Environmental education, consumer education, family education, accident prevention, health education, and civic service were the most important content of this new course. The main goal of this mandatory course was to develop “free, responsible, independent and solidary citizens.” Activities in the course include participation in school conferences conducted by organizations such as Amnesty International, Red Cross, etc.; debate about how a society without freedom (e.g., press, expression, assembly, and association) would impact daily life; classroom games about personal and societal values (e.g., freedom, responsibility, self-respect, non-discrimination, justice); and discussion about movie characters’ behaviors and values, etc. In 1989, this course was imbedded in a broader non-disciplinary course called “Área-Escola” and included personal, social, and cultural education, intended to promote students’ reflexive thinking. In 2012, Law nº 139/12 discontinued this course from 5th grade and beyond, but retained a 45 minute per week period for activities that schools often individually determine will be directed toward civic education.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES REGARDING CHARACTER EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL

In light of the history related to character education in Portugal, we contend that at least four questions currently influence the field:

- What constitutes character education in the social and educational framework of Portugal?
- Who should be in charge of providing character education: the family, the school system, or both?
- What is the core content of character education (what is there to be transmitted)?
- How can character education be imparted to students (modeling, directly taught, etc.)?

What Constitutes Character Education in the Social and Educational Framework of Portugal?

At present, what constitutes character education in Portugal is unclear, and the government has not provided clear direction on this subject (Marques, 2008). It may be that the government is still somewhat apprehensive about the concept, either because of its political implications or because it is perceived as an educational matter, rather than an instructional one. The Portuguese government may feel more comfortable addressing instructional (curriculum) rather than educational (attitudes, values) subjects because

the former appear to be more consensual in society. The recent changes in the basic school (1st through 9th grade) national curriculum (Law nº 139/12) focused specifically on core curricular areas (e.g., mathematics, Portuguese language) at the expense of such courses as “Personal and Social Education.” Indeed, the law is very straightforward; the intention was “to reduce curriculum spread and focus on the core disciplines of Portuguese, mathematics, history, geography, physics, chemistry, and the natural sciences, and promote the teaching of English” (p. 3476). Moreover, “it is intended that civic education become a cross-sectional area likely to be addressed in all areas of the curriculum, not as a mandatory isolated subject on its own” (p. 3477). A major tenet of this law is that it is more important for students to receive good instruction in core curricular areas and that civic education may be embedded in every course, but not a separate course. It is argued, for instance, that sex education issues can be addressed in biology classes, financial education in math classes, and the sense of “fair-play” in physical education classes.

Who Should Be in Charge of Providing Character Education?

In the past, in Portugal as in many other countries, the family was perceived as the main educational institution. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, schools significantly expanded the scope of their role in education (Barreto & Preto, 1996). In a short period of time, schools became much more than instructional institutions and assumed part of the educational tasks that previously were the purview of families. The curriculum itself reflected these social changes through the incorporation of a number of courses and activities such as supervised study, civic education, and school projects, which came to fill about one third of students’ school time. The part of the curriculum committed to the civic education of school-age children was inconsistent, varying from school to school and from teacher to teacher. By the end of the 1990s, a significant number of schools were using that time to teach mathematics and Portuguese language or to discuss classroom discipline with students (Lopes, 2009). The manuals for those courses state that the course should be organized around activities (e.g., sharing personal experiences of violence or bullying) and not around content (e.g., living with others; situations of conflict and violence; specific safety behaviors) (Evaristo et al., 2006).

What Is the Core Content of Character Education in Portugal?

The current climate is not conducive to discussions about character education, since the course on “Personal and Social Education” recently was dropped from 5th to 9th grade and was never offered as a regular course in the primary grades. Furthermore, schools have been given the autonomy to do whatever they wanted with the time previously allocated to “Personal and Social Education.” This means that every

school likely chooses its own activities. This is not unique to Portugal. In countries around the world, there are few common goals among character education programs, perhaps because it is difficult to find something fundamental or universally relevant to all students or to society (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005).

How Can Character Education Be Imparted?

This issue brings up the distinction between education and teaching. Most of the learning that occurs at home through parenting and in school under the guidance of teachers occurs as a result of modeling. Both parents and teachers serve as powerful models for children to emulate (Walker, 2008) in these contexts. However, imparting character education can become challenging during classroom instruction, especially when students are required to comply with teacher rules and expectations. This tends to happen mostly in classes where character education is not evaluated formally. Finally, some students may perceive content related to character education as a form of indoctrination (i.e., something that goes against a person's personal beliefs or values) and therefore be unwilling to participate in instruction (e.g., Barros, 2002; Sears & Hughes, 2006).

CONCLUSION

In countries around the world, education personnel strive to create learning environments that support the social, emotional, and cognitive development of all students. Portugal is no exception. Because of its past history and the current economic climate, Portugal struggles to determine the role of character education, who should be responsible for providing character education, and how best to promote character education as a way to achieve safe and effective schools. To date, there have not been any controlled studies about the effects of civic education courses in Portugal. Yet, despite lack of government guidance or a strong research basis, we believe that character education has a place in Portuguese schools as one way to support a positive and productive education for all students.

References

- Barreto, A., & Preto, C. V. (1996). *Portugal 1960/1995: Social indicators [Portugal 1960/1995: Indicadores Sociais]*. Porto, Portugal: Cadernos do Público.
- Barros, E. (2002). What are we talking about when we talk about citizenship education? [De que falamos quando falamos em Educação para a Cidadania?]. *Noesis*, 61, 39-41.
- Benninga, J. S., Berkowitz, M. W., Kuehn, P., & Smith, K. (2003). The relationship of character education implementation and academic achievement in elementary schools. *Journal of Research in Character Education*, 1(6), 19-32.
- Cunha, P. D. (1996). Character education: Reaction or innovation in moral education? [A educação do carácter: Reacção ou inovação em educação moral?] *Brotéria: Cultura e Informação*, 142(3), 263-286.
- Davidson, M., Lickona, T., & Khmelkov, V. (2008). Smart and good schools: A new paradigm for high school character education. In L. P. Nucci & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (pp. 370-390). London, England: Routledge.
- Evaristo, T., Oliveira, I., Vaz, E., Sales, F., Carvalho, I., Nunes, L. (2006). *Citizenship and security. [Cidadania e segurança]*. Retrieved from <http://www.min-edu.pt>
- Hunter, M. A. (2000). *The death of character*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The psychology of moral development: Nature and validity of moral stages* (Vol. II). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Law nº 46/86 (1986). *Educational system law*. Lisbon, Portugal: Ministry of Education.
- Law nº 139/12 (2012). *Basic and secondary school curriculum*. Lisbon, Portugal: Ministry of Education.
- Lopes, J. A. (2009). *Behavior, learning, and teaching in classroom order and disorder [Comportamento, aprendizagem e "ensinagem" na ordem e desordem da sala de aula]*. Braga, Portugal: Psiquilibrios.
- Marques, R. (2008). *The book of the new character education [O livro da nova educação do carácter]*. Retrieved from <http://pt.scribd.com/doc/56635021/ramiro-marques-o-novo-livro-da-educacao-do-caracter>
- Otten, E. H. (2000). *Character education. ERIC Digest*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education.
- Raths, L. E., Harmin, M., & Simon, S. B. (1966). *Values and teaching*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.
- Richardson, R. C., Tolson, H., Huang, T.-Y., & Lee, Y.-H. (2009). Character education: Lessons for teaching social and emotional competence. *Children and Schools*, 31(2), 71-78.
- Ryan, K., & Bohlin, K. (2001). *Building character in schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sears, A., & Hughes, A. (2006). Citizenship: Education or indoctrination? *Citizenship Teaching and Learning*, 2(1), 3-17.
- Smagorinsky, P., & Taxel, J. (2005). *The discourse of character education: Culture wars in the classroom*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Social and Character Development Research Consortium. (2010). *Efficacy of schoolwide programs to promote social and character development and reduce problem behavior in elementary school children*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Research, U.S. Department of Education.
- Valente, O., & Fonseca, E. N. (2007). *Building a more ethical and human school: The input from the New Character Education. [A construção de uma escola mais ética e humana: O contributo da Nova Educação do Carácter]*. Retrieved from www.google.pt/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCsQF-jAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.educ.fc.ul.pt%2Fdocentes%2Fmvalente%2Fleituras%2520para%2520os%2520alunos%2FArtigo.doc&ei=gf2TUdiJIM2Q7AbD7YCACA&usq=AFQjCNE-XTP_zy2_WVxagIr22CavUINfg&sig=IwkiKgHs_oJM-QkWNc87jfw&bvm=bv.46471029,d.Yms
- Walker, J. M. T. (2008). Looking at teacher practices through the lens of parenting style. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 76(2), 218-240.

